

Sovereignty of Indian Tribes



Matthew Thomas, leader of the Narragansett Indian tribe, addresses 24 eastern U.S. tribes at a meeting in Mashantucket, Connecticut, in 2003. Like other groups, Native Americans pursue unified political agendas.

Federally recognized American Indian tribes are considered sovereign entities within the United States. This sovereign status—sometimes called “nation-within-a-nation”—is protected by treaty, federal law, and court rulings. Members of tribes are not subject to state or local income, sales, or property taxes, and states have little power to regulate Indians in tribal territories. Tribes have their own rule-making bodies and judicial systems to settle disputes arising on tribal lands or between tribal members. While significant, tribal sovereignty is not absolute; Indians are subject to federal taxes and to laws passed by the U.S. Congress.